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ABSTRACT

This booklet is a guide for discussion among teacher groups, including affiliates of the International Reading Association and the National Council of Teachers of English. The booklet presents 14 brief case studies designed to increase awareness of the range of meanings embraced today by the term literacy--reading and writing of course, but also the understanding of other visual and symbolic images that occur within the student's social, educational, and personal experience. Each case study discussed in the booklet includes questions intended to stimulate a sharing of personal attitudes and experiences as well as further reading and study. (MS)

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CASES IN LITERACY

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AN AGENDA FOR DISCUSSION

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CASES IN LITERACY

AN AGENDA FOR DISCUSSION

Prepared by

International Reading Association

National Council of Teachers of English

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Cases in Literacy

This document is a guide for discussion among teacher groups, including affiliates of the International Reading Association and the National Council of Teachers of English. Drafted by representatives from the two associations and endorsed by the NCTE Executive Committee and the IRA Board of Directors, the cases are designed to increase awareness of the range of meanings embraced today by the term literacy—reading and writing, yes, but understanding also of other visual and symbolic images that occur within the student's social, educational, and personal experience. Questions following each case study will stimulate a sharing of personal attitudes and experiences as well as further reading and study. The entire set is designed to clarify understanding of what is meant by literacy in the world today.

Although the cases arise from experiences in North America, a draft document reviewed by international as well as American members revealed that the cases are pertinent to many countries. Nonetheless, both teachers from other countries and American teachers may wish to use these as patterns in generating their own cases.

For several years, teachers, administrators, legislators, and researchers have attempted to define the nature of literacy. In fact, current use of the term suggests part of that struggle. To be literate once

carried the notion that a person was able simply to read, and a literate person held a somewhat elevated status in society. Recent focus on the importance of writing and the revelation by research that similar language processes underlie literate production in reading and writing have led us to look for a word to embrace all of these processes. In this case, the word is *literacy*.

Complex human problems require us to broaden our understanding of the nature and function of literacy. The scope of the literacy issue is revealed in the diversity of cultural groups in American society and around the world (the fact that during the last decade of this century one-third of the students entering American classrooms have a different language spoken at home than in school); in the variety of uses made of the printed word in today's cultures; and in the serious problems facing the world that require sustained literate thought by a much broader segment of the population than we have seen in the past. In its most basic sense, literacy involves the uses of symbols of all kinds for personal, community, and social communication. Here, for the most part, we concentrate on reading and writing.

The list of issues in this document is not exhaustive. Rather, the cases are intended to raise new issues and to provide a forum for many points of view. We believe that the analysis of problems in literacy that will emerge from such discussion is a prelude to engaging in intelligent action.

Issue 1

The Definition of Literacy

Background

School systems seldom get into discussions or struggles centering on questions such as "What does it mean to be literate?" or "What is literacy for?" Rather, school efforts are focused on which textbooks to choose, which skills to cover, and how to boost scores on standardized tests. Such concerns tend to deflect attention from considering the root of the literacy problem. Until school deliberations focus on the critical issues and school actions are taken that follow the resolution of the discussions, teaching that promotes real reading and writing will not occur. How can schools plan for action on literacy unless all parties who will participate in developing a plan fully understand the basic problems?

Case

The following discussion involved two members of a curriculum committee who struggled with the nature of literacy. Broad differences of opinion, reflecting a range of philosophies about curriculum, learning theory, and the purpose of schools and literacy, are present.

Katherine: I don't think we know where we are going, and we need to say what literacy is and what it is for. When I work with my eighth graders I feel as though I'm just following a paper instead of teaching with a sense of what reading and writing are for.

Roger: We don't have time for defining terms. Enough definitions have been written by schools, publishers, and universities. We'll be here for two days if we do that. Do we have to reinvent the wheel?

Katherine: No, listen. Do you think it is important for our students to read books...on their own?

Roger: Of course.

Katherine: Well, we imply it is important, but we don't say it is important for all students. We have this highflying document here, but you and I know that most students read only if we make them. They may score well on tests, but they simply don't read, and I say unless kids are reading on their own, they aren't literate.

Roger: Wait a minute. You know that all the kids are not going to be reading on their own. Forty percent of my sixth-grade students don't read books, and I say the trouble is they don't have the skills and attitudes they should have gotten in the early years. They can't even read aloud; they stumble over the words. How are they going to be able to even read the driver's manual to get a license? And many of them don't even care.

Katherine: You are discussing what it means to be literate, and although I don't agree with you, this is just the kind of discussion we ought to be having. Sure, it is important to be able to read the words, but I can't buy the fact that so many shouldn't read and enjoy books. I think such reading ought to be for all kids.

Roger: Well, I say we might want to have the objective that kids read on their own when they leave this system, but it can't be done. Tests show that there are always going to be some on the bottom and some on the top.

Questions for Discussion

1. How can educators be encouraged to develop and clarify their ideas of what it means to be literate?
2. Is there any reason why all students should not see reading and writing as useful in their own lives?
3. Is it important for each school system to struggle with local definitions of literacy, or can such definitions be imported from other systems and/or from the professional literature?

Issue 2

The Values of Literacy—Personal, Social, Economic

Background

Literacy has value for people along many dimensions. It can be a means for enlarging one's perspective—for coming to know the world beyond the here and now. It makes it possible to communicate with others in more diverse ways. It greatly expands one's potential for employment. And it is a prerequisite for full participation in a modern technological world. Moreover, broad-based literacy is required for the effective functioning of large democratic institutions. Literacy also offers a means of spiritual enhancement. Throughout history, religion has been a major source of motivation for literacy learning and teaching both in written and oral traditions. Although this motivation is not always as strong as it once was, it continues to be significant in many societies.

Yet, many nations today have attained only low levels of literacy. Even in relatively highly literate nations, those in which nearly all citizens can read and write at a minimal level, for many, sufficient literacy is not realized. Too many people, especially those from economically disadvantaged groups and racial/ethnic minority groups, are not included in the literacy activities of society. Many of those who have attained minimal literacy cannot apply their literacy skills in carrying out the complex tasks demanded by modern society.

Schools have a responsibility to familiarize students with the necessary skills and processes of reading and writing and to provide

them with opportunities to integrate these, if we are to enhance literacy ability.

Currently, many students learn the so-called skills in isolated activities or situations. In addition to the often abstract nature of such skills, learning is hindered by the lack of practice in real-life settings. It is not enough that we are skilled in the basics. We can write, but can we express ourselves clearly? We can read, but can we interpret?

Schools today present students with vast amounts of information, but we are failing in an important area: teaching communication. The brightest individuals will be unsuccessful if they cannot communicate and discuss ideas.

Recent reports, such as those from the National Assessment of Educational Progress, provide useful indicators of the current status of reading and writing in the United States. The reports showed that 95 percent of young American adults could read relatively simple text and understand it at the literal level. Yet only a small percentage could carry out moderately complex tasks using their literacy skills. Black and Hispanic students performed even more poorly than white students. On tasks such as synthesizing the main argument from a newspaper article, or computing the cost of a specified meal, or determining the correct change from a stated amount, only about 40 percent of the white students, 10 percent of the black students, and 20 percent of the Hispanic students were successful. Results such as these highlight a pervasive failure on the part of our schools in teaching students to apply analytic and critical thinking skills to more complex literacy tasks, a failure that disproportionately affects low-income and ethnic minority students.

Case

Literacy tasks and events outside of school are often qualitatively different from school tasks. Outside-of-school tasks are subsumed

within a larger "project"; collaboration is required at various points along the way; audiences vary from task to task; and the product is important (functional), not simply a basis for evaluation. Johnny, a student in rural Appalachia, is learning something about the uses of literacy that goes beyond his usual experiences with texts in schools. He and other students are engaged in a systematic study of communication in their own community. They look into the ways in which reading habits, writing, and oral language vary with age, occupation, and sex. Through this process, students are building on the language skills they brought from home and bridging to valued school-based literacy education. Students learn to ask questions in interviews about the uses of reading and writing in the local workplaces; to take notes; to have discussions and to compare notes with fellow learners; to answer questions and defend points of view; to communicate progress to the teacher and often to an absent teacher-colleague by mail; to write drafts and to engage in writing conferences; and to communicate the results, in oral presentations and in print, to others, often to community members—all the while focusing attention on language itself.

Such projects involve the students in their local communities and let them draw on the resources of these communities (for interviews and observations). At the same time, such projects allow students to practice on a recurring basis the literacy strategies and processes that comprise discursive thinking and writing. "Practice" is a key concept here. Any literate behavior must be practiced in realistic and meaningful settings in order to be developed. In fact, school-based strategies and processes can be lost after schooling when they are not practiced in daily life. Many of the skills and processes that go into the kinds of projects described are relevant to a wide variety of settings outside school.

Questions for Discussion

1. What should be the goals of teaching literacy? Is there a need to reconcile issues of personal growth and social requirements with respect to literacy?
2. How much does literacy help in socioeconomic advancement? What are the specific socioeconomic and political factors that hinder or help the spread of literacy?
3. What is the significance of differences between school literacy tasks and those encountered in the world of work? Do these differences hold up across different kinds of work (professional, service-oriented, industrial)?
4. Is is possible to make school literacy tasks more similar to work tasks and other real-life tasks? For all kinds of school learning? For all kinds of students?
5. What critical abilities are called for in work tasks and other real-life tasks that are not taught in school?
6. In what ways does the culture of classrooms and of schools as institutions constrain even "real-world" tasks?
7. Are there underlying features of literate behavior common to the cultures of the school and the workplace, and if so, how can we foster the development of literate behavior that makes those connections?
8. To what extent have international efforts been successful in developing literacy around the world? What are the resources available for such an international action? What are the characteristics of successful literacy programs that can be emulated in different parts of the world?
9. What are the local resources and traditions that can be used to promote literacy in developing countries? For example, how can the more widely available traditional schools (such as the Quranic schools in the Islamic world) be made compatible with the more modern educational institutions in promoting literacy?

Issue 3

Becoming Literate

Background

The development of literacy is a process that begins for all children in literate societies—regardless of economic, linguistic, or cultural background—long before children enter into formal schooling, and a process that can continue throughout a lifetime. Literacy skills originate with oral language or the even more basic skills of perceiving, conceptualizing, and building hypotheses about the world. Literacy implies enculturation into ways of thinking, interpreting, and using language in a variety of complex activities and settings typical of a rapidly changing world increasingly dependent upon text or its functional equivalents in other media. The forms of literacy vary, but they all share an emphasis on meaningfulness. Thus, it is crucial that children's encounters with text and the tasks they engage in be focused on making meaning. Since all children have that focus in their initial experience with language, the task for schooling is to start with what children know and what they can do with language and to help them learn to use language in broad, empowering ways.

Case

The acquisition of literacy is a process of education that may imply cultural change, depending on the students' racial or ethnic background. It may involve learning new or different cultural and/or

linguistic meanings. A poem written by an Apache child in Arizona illustrates this point.*

Have you ever hurt about baskets?
I have, seeing my grandmother weaving
for a long time.
Have you ever hurt about work?
I have, because my father works too hard
and he tells how he works.
Have you ever hurt about cattle?
I have, because my grandfather has been working
on the cattle for a long time.
Have you ever hurt about school?
I have, because I learned a lot of words
from school.
And they are not my words.

The poem reveals much about formal and informal learning, about the roles watching and talking have in learning, and about the problems posed by school environments for promoting literacy. Children learn from experience, personal or vicarious, and the power of experiences at home conveys a reality not often achieved by experiences at school.

* Reprinted with permission from Courtney Cazden, *Classroom Discourse: The Language of Teaching and Learning*, Heinemann, 1988.

Questions for Discussion

1. How do sociocultural differences, including experiences at home, in the local community, and in society at large, affect literacy learning in school?
2. How can the school best acknowledge the socializing influences, for better or for worse, of the peer group and of the home?
3. What is the best way to help students to learn about successful uses of language in school, where "success" is culturally determined, and at the same time respect and build upon their own experiences with language?
4. How explicit should teachers be about the rules and the concepts for school-appropriate and, to a large extent, society-appropriate literacy?
5. What is the role of direct explanation and other aspects of instruction in developing in students specific reading and writing strategies? What is their role in helping students learn to use language in empowering ways?
6. What is the role of learner initiative in the development of reading and writing strategies?
7. How can schools and communities work together to provide a foundation for broad-based literacy learning?
8. One of the issues facing curriculum authorities in many countries (especially the less developed ones) is the place to be given in their literacy teaching to the national culture and to the former colonizer's culture. Under such conditions, what are the roles of the national language and the roles of the second language in literacy instruction?

Issue 4

The Teaching and Learning of Literacy

Background

A number of teaching situations present dilemmas for improving student literacy. The first dilemma lies with well-prepared teachers who are reasonably up-to-date on research and instructional practices but are frustrated with the administrative and curricular practices that run contrary to their definition of literacy. The second dilemma lies with unprepared teachers who wish to improve their abilities in teaching literacy but are thwarted by a lack of resources. Whatever the problems, teachers should not minimize their own responsibilities within the classroom. Often, the gap is too wide between what teachers believe they should do and what they actually do.

Many highly qualified professionals are leaving the profession because they are unable to realize in the classroom what they believe is philosophically and pedagogically important. Others leave, or remain as cynics, because they are poorly equipped by training or knowledge of research to improve their teaching in literacy from year to year.

Consider the following four cases.

Case A

Elena Richards is a seventh-grade teacher with twelve years' experience who has enjoyed teaching—until the past two years when

new administrative guidelines required her to give up the teaching of language arts and to work with her students only on reading. In the past, she taught reading and language arts with the same students. Her greatest regret is that she has much less time with her students and, as a result, cannot combine the same approaches to literacy with both reading and writing. She used to have the students for two fifty-minute periods; now she has them for only fifty minutes. She reasons that "both are composing processes and to split them up is to produce an artificial separation. One helps the other. We are wasting time, and I just don't see the improvement in my students that I used to." Elena both read and wrote with her students as they argued and defended their texts each week in class.

Her school administration maintains, however, that tests differentiate between reading and writing with separate batteries, and therefore scores will go up if she will just concentrate on reading comprehension and let someone else specialize in language arts skills. Elena was not consulted about the change, and when she argued with the administration, she found that student schedules had already been configured to fit the new teaching plan. Elena now works for a computer company, writing technical manuals. Her final statement: "When I can't do my job, and the people I work with don't respect my judgment, then we no longer have a profession."

Questions for Discussion

1. How can teachers help administrators broaden their understanding of literacy and the process of literacy learning? How can the culture of the school be changed to support the professional growth of both teachers and administrators?
2. How can teachers gain more time with fewer students in order to help the students become more self-directed with their own literacy?

3. How can assessment be restructured to include more real reading and writing and to integrate those two aspects of literacy?
4. How can highly effective teachers who have proven records in assisting students to become more literate be kept within the profession? How can such teachers be provided opportunities to help less knowledgeable colleagues?
5. How can teachers gain greater control over their professional lives and assume substantive roles in shaping curricula, instruction, and assessment?
6. How can the organizational and administrative barriers between reading and language arts be broken down?

Case B

Michael Lindquist is a fourth-year fifth-grade teacher who wishes to improve his instruction in reading and writing. He is generally aware—after attending a county convention—that changes are being made in his field, with more reading of literature and more time provided for writing. But he has never been professionally prepared to teach either one. Two days before school started, a professor from the state university 150 miles away ran a three-hour workshop introducing trade books and ways to respond to them. It seemed simple enough, yet he hadn't read any of the recommended books, and when he did try to respond to student writing about the books they were reading, he didn't know what to write. Students' writing seemed dull, and he could sympathize with their tedium. He sensed he needed much more help, as did other teachers in the system. The new superintendent, with concurrence of the language supervisor and principal, mandated a new reading/writing process program. Michael, along with most other staff members, was floundering.

Questions for Discussion

1. How can local school systems reassess inservice and professional development to better support teachers (not only financially) in their learning and implementing of instruction?
2. How can universities and school systems work together to learn the best approaches to staff development in literacy education?
3. When university programs offer separate courses in reading and writing, how can teachers learn that one process complements the other and then develop a balanced approach to working with reading and writing? How can universities be made to offer more integrated reading-writing-language arts?
4. How can teachers and their professional organizations combat traditional views of literacy instruction, which may, in fact, legislate against effective teaching of writing and reading, such as the view that knowledge of grammatical terminology is the keystone of language arts proficiency?
5. How can teachers judge which proposed innovations are worth trying in their classrooms?

Case C

Mattie Smith is a fifth-grade teacher who has been stimulated by a summer workshop on ways of teaching writing and reading, and who hopes to change her emphasis in classroom instruction to stress experiences in using language. She asks her principal for more information on process approaches and is told that she had better concentrate on basics. Test scores in the district have not improved sufficiently to satisfy the superintendent and school board, who have asked that more time be devoted to teaching the skills that will be tested.

Questions for Discussion

1. How can a teacher join with other like-minded teachers to persuade district leaders of the real nature of literacy? How can teachers then persuade administrators, parents, and the general public? What are the most basic aspects of literacy?
2. How can schools balance attention to the basic skills with attention to the equally basic processes of communication?
3. What experiences can be planned to educate school board members and leaders in the local communities as to effective school action to address literacy problems?
4. How can schools foster public understanding of the changing nature of literacy training and evaluation and the needs of the literacy learner?

Case D

Ibraham Pavlava studied the teaching of reading and writing in an American university and learned ways of strengthening literacy skills that had been effectively used with non-English-speaking students in the United States. Yet upon his return to Afghanistan, when he tried to apply his newly acquired teaching skills in the classroom, he experienced many of the same frustrations referred to in the cases presented above—administrative indifference, a curriculum focus incompatible with his, a lack of adequate resources, and an external testing program that stressed knowledge of key literary and cultural documents.

Question for Discussion

1. How can educational training in a foreign country be best adapted to the realities of one's home country?

Issue 5

The Assessment of Literacy

Background

Historically, both the general public and professional educators have come to regard assessment as nothing but a series of paper/pencil tests imposed on teachers and students by those in positions of authority—those concerned with accountability. Assessment has become something we do for the authorities rather than—as it ought to be—something we do for ourselves and our students. Daily interactions can help us gather evidence to guide our decisions about student learning, instructional techniques, and curriculum. This kind of assessment is a necessary part of the teaching/learning process, one that provides critical information to help us plan for our students' learning experiences. Over the long term, an evaluation of learning based on multiple modes of describing students' competence tends to paint a more complete, more substantial portrait of an individual's needs than does any single test.

Teachers and administrators must rely on their expertise to develop and use a wide variety of assessment tools to draw conclusions about student progress. We have reached a stage in the development of our knowledge about reading and writing processes at which we can no longer depend mainly upon formal and indirect performance measures, such as those found on most commercially available tests (the machine-scorable, norm-referenced, or criterion-referenced tests so often associated with assessment). The use of assessments that are grounded directly in classroom instruction does not imply that educators should discontinue using commercially available tests. Rather, such use encourages a more realistic perspective on the value of com-

mercially available tests and recognizes that in educational decision making it is dangerous to rely on any single score as a measure of learning. This point of view must not be expressed only to teachers and administrators but to the public as well. Certainly, any discussion of literacy growth and development should address the real, vocal concerns of parents and community members who want to understand changes in the curriculum.

As teachers, we know that evaluation of our students requires more than a simple score on those paper/pencil measures. We know that we learn about our students over time by mentally and physically keeping track of their learning as we interact with them in the classroom. The assessment tool kit must be expanded to include more exemplars of contextualized assessment strategies—those indicators of learning that are gathered as an integral part of the teaching/learning situation.

To any decontextualized measures, such as formal standardized and criterion-referenced tests, we must add assessments of actual performances—ongoing analyses of students completing a variety of literacy tasks that have been initiated at the prerogative of the school, the teacher, or the student. But performance measures are not sufficient even when they are personally initiated and functionally motivated. Equally important are the kinds of information that can be gathered only by observing students during literacy events or by interviewing them to determine their skills and strategies and dispositions toward literacy activities.

Case

Andrea Perkins is a third-grade teacher in a semirural school district several miles outside a medium-sized midwestern city. She has been an active professional for several years, recently taking a leave of absence in order to complete her master's degree. Upon returning to her classroom last fall, she attempted to put into practice many of the

informal, highly contextualized forms of assessment advocated in this statement. At first, her administration was supportive; however, when word spread through the community that she was not giving spelling tests and was, instead, having students practice words from the stories and essays that they wrote daily, her principal felt that she had to put a stop to Andrea's approach to assessment. The principal made it clear to Andrea that she should return to administering the end-of-unit tests in the basals and the weekly spelling tests in the district-adopted spelling program. She was told, in fact, that she would have to give up her regular writing sessions so that she would have time to get the students ready for the state writing test. Today, Andrea has pretty much given up on her dream of a classroom in which reading and writing instruction and assessment are completed for real purposes and real audiences.

Questions for Discussion

1. How can we help policymakers to understand the limitations of external measures of assessment? How can we help them take into account the backgrounds of the students and the situations in which they are learning to become literate?
2. How can contextualized assessment procedures of the kind that teachers can and should use be promoted as alternatives to allegedly more "objective" procedures?
3. What kinds of teacher education programs are necessary to help teachers develop the knowledge, experience, and self-confidence they will need to make the kinds of serious and highly sophisticated professional judgments required in assessment?
4. How can we change commercial tests in order to bring them into line with current views of reading and writing? How can the new tests of literacy that are required be made commercially available?

Issue 6

Literacy and the Exceptional Student

Background

For many reasons, some students do not become literate in school as quickly as others. Some are classified by school personnel as requiring more than the regular classroom instructional program to help them become literate. Though such assistance is the legal right of many students, problems can arise when they are identified as being in need of assistance.

Case

When Sarah reached the end of first grade in her school, she was able to write her name and recognize perhaps twenty different words on sight. She could read only two of the books available in her classroom and was in the preprimer of the basal reading series that was used in her class. Both her parents and the school were concerned about her progress. She did not like to read or write. Her teacher and the specialists in the school, in consultation with Sarah's parents, considered the following options for the next year:

1. Retain Sarah in first grade for another year. In this case, her literacy development would not look so different from that of the other children beginning first grade.
2. Promote her to second grade but provide remedial services to supplement her classroom instruction.

3. Get the school psychologist to test her to see if there was any reason why she should be classified as learning disabled.

In the fall, Sarah receives reading and writing instruction both in the classroom and in the remedial reading room. She leaves the classroom during her independent work time in language arts and goes to the remedial program for thirty minutes a day.

Sarah's reading teacher stresses the use of trade books, students' choice of reading materials, and the integration of reading and writing. Sarah's reading materials consist of predictable language stories, as well as her own and other students' writing. But in thirty minutes, the teacher finds it hard to get a great deal done with her eight students. Sarah's teacher last year used a basal reading program that emphasized whole word recognition. Her regular classroom teacher stresses the fact that Sarah is not good at matching letters and sounds. She has Sarah reading a series of books composed of words with highly regular spelling, such as "Dan can fan the man."

Sarah finds the situation very confusing and is not doing well. The strategies she uses in one situation will not transfer to the other situation. She is referred to the school psychologist, who is about to give Sarah a battery of tests to see whether there are grounds to classify her as learning disabled. In this school, that would mean that she would then go to a resource room program for part of the day, where she would be given perceptual-motor training in line with the special education teacher's view of children's reading problems. Each teacher is convinced that his or her approach is the best for Sarah. Each is even able to cite some research to support that position.

Questions for Discussion

1. How can the conflicting views of literacy be reconciled so that Sarah is less confused?
2. Can these issues be resolved while allowing teachers to exercise their professional judgment?
3. To the extent that curriculum decisions are left to teachers' professional judgment, should these teachers exercise this judgment individually, or should such decisions be made collectively by all professionals in the school involved with the age group in question?
4. Suppose that, despite the school's best efforts, Sarah's reading and writing improve only about half as fast as that of the other students, and she continues to drop further behind. What is the extent of the school's responsibility to Sarah?

Issue 7

Cultural Differences and Literacy

Background

The literacy efforts of many countries encompass migrant population groups. Refugees who flee war and occupation, as well as migrants who move to cities or countries where there is a promise of food, money, and work, often possess a language quite different from that of the majority culture. The mismatch and lack of accommodation for cultural and linguistic differences can produce tensions between the differing cultures. Worse, often neither group capitalizes on the language and cultural contributions of the other.

Many types of community-based literacies derive from the different kinds of socialization students experience at home and in their immediate environment. Diverse cultural groups make different uses of written materials, integrating them in different ways into their daily activities within and outside the family, and promoting different attitudes and values toward text and schooling in society.

Case

Cornelius is one of three migrant students in his fourth-grade classroom. He will spend approximately three months in this class before moving on. Four other children are learning the new language of the classroom. Forty percent of the thirty-one children in his classroom have parents who speak a different language. Cornelius is curi-

ous and active and brings about the same background knowledge to his books, but he constructs highly personalized interpretations of the texts. He draws and writes about his own people, but the teacher sees him as off-track and rebellious. She has not been prepared professionally or emotionally to deal with such a range of linguistic and cultural backgrounds, and she operates in a school system that is still essentially monocultural. She shifts into maintaining order and strives to produce some central standard in the face of diversity.

Questions for Discussion

1. How can bicultural diversity be used as a resource? How can it be effectively drawn upon and expressed by students?
2. What procedures should be used to examine this diversity?
3. How can the host system help students to keep in touch with their own culture?
4. How can teachers acquire the education and extra help needed for themselves and the students? What educational opportunities will help teachers develop sensitivity to culturally diverse students?
5. How can the general cultural climate in a school system be made more sensitive to culturally diverse students?
6. How can students be helped to acquire or add school-based literacy to their existing ways of dealing with language?
7. How can we maintain diversity within a common school-based literacy program?

sun
snail
hand
bird
egg
jump

Issue 8

Literacy, Science, and Technology

Background

Like most other forms of social activity, the enterprise of science is one that calls for rich communication. Scientists talk with one another, argue for particular hypotheses, read journal articles, write research plans and reports, and generally use language in a variety of complex ways that are at the heart of the scientific process. The same could be said for the learning of science, mathematics, and technological subjects (such as computer science) in school. Yet the teaching and learning of science often are seen as unrelated to the learning of literate behaviors.

Case

Different students have different facts and different ways of integrating facts into a scientific theory. Teachers, texts, and children make different assumptions about what science is and the meaning of scientific discourse. Felicia, for example, works hard as she reads about the causes of seasonal changes in her social studies book. Both the questions in the book and her teacher's guided reading emphasize the identification of unfamiliar terms, such as "equinox" or "axis," or the memorization of minute details, such as the fact that the axis of the earth is tilted at 23½ degrees. Not surprisingly, Felicia learns a few terms but has trouble fitting them into her prior, informal theo-

ries about the seasons. When asked to answer questions on a quiz, she appears to have learned something because the quiz focuses on definitions and details. But Felicia still doesn't know why there are seasons. Nor do *any* of her classmates. Moreover, she has failed to see science and scientific discourse as a process of questioning, building models, testing hypotheses, and critically analyzing assumptions. She has thus developed a fundamental misconception about what it means to reason and learn within new domains. Ironically, her teacher would not have approached the reading of a short story in the same essentially uncritical fashion.

Questions for Discussion

1. What is the relationship between understanding scientific discourse, engaging in scientific reasoning, and learning scientific concepts?
2. What assumptions about learning, knowledge, and literacy are implicit in textbooks across different domains, such as math, science, or social studies? What discourse norms are implicitly modeled or promoted? How much separation should be maintained between the subject areas, particularly between the language subjects, such as reading, writing, and the other language arts, and the mathematics-related subjects, such as arithmetic, algebra, geometry, and the various sciences?
3. How much separation should there be in the education of teachers for instruction in reading and writing, on the one hand, and sciences and mathematics on the other?
4. Are there specific forms of discourse for different subjects? Are there elements that should be taught explicitly? How? Are there other ways to help students learn about the rhetorics of different subjects?

5. What are the many literacies and how useful is it to broaden our definition of literacy to include these many ways of understanding and functioning in the world?
6. One of the directions advocated by international organizations and national governments is the emphasis on functional literacy. How can such an emphasis be reconciled with the goal of helping all students develop a broader-based literacy?

Issue 9

Demands for Higher Levels of Literacy

Background

Literacy once was held to be synonymous with reading. An individual who was literate could read; one who could not was illiterate. The rise of broad-based public education in many societies has brought minimal skill in reading and basic competence in writing to almost all students. What public education has not been able to do is to help large numbers of young people acquire the competence to carry out complex tasks using reading and writing related to the world of work and to life outside school. In addition, workers with limited language skills, who cannot speak well and/or understand requests and instructions from customers and supervisors, will be relegated permanently to the bottom of the career ladder. As these lower-level jobs continue to disappear from the labor market, people with inadequate language skills will not be able to locate employment. Future retraining or reeducation will depend substantially on the level of literacy an individual attains.

As has already been pointed out (Issue 2), 95 percent of all American students can read, but only a small percentage can engage in the analytic and critical thinking that underlies many of the tasks in our technologically advanced and rapidly changing society. The need for improving the reading and writing of low-income and minority students is particularly acute.

Case

Juan dropped out of school after nine years, feeling that formal education no longer served a clear purpose for him. He was anxious to support himself and earn enough money to purchase a pickup truck. An outgoing, agreeable youngster, Juan was quickly able to secure a position as a lineworker's assistant with the telephone company at a minimum wage, and he looked forward to promotion within the company. The promotion did not come, and, in time, Juan found that associates who joined the company after he did received preferred positions. The reason, according to his superiors, was that Juan was unable to understand the instructions in technical manuals and apply them to the solution of problems encountered on the job.

Questions for Discussion

1. To what extent are many young people limited on the job by the inadequacy of their literacy?
2. What can be done to make schooling seem more purposeful for students such as Juan?
3. Should the continuing teaching of reading place greater emphasis on the application of skill to work situations, or should it stress "learning to learn"?
4. How can society provide for the continuing education of young people who have dropped out of school? Do school-industry partnerships offer a solution?

Issue 10

Broader Definitions of Literacy

Background

As the modes of communication have changed in our society, so has our conception of the nature of literacy. The shift from reliance on print in conveying ideas to reliance on the aural/oral/visual media of radio, telephone, and television has awakened us to the importance of "oracy" and visual literacy as basic to an education preparing youth for life in the next century. The rise of computer applications has stimulated concern with computer literacy, and some specialists call for scientific literacy or mathematical literacy as essential for all citizens.

Recently, awareness of educational shortcomings in introducing children to "the best that has been known and thought in the world" (as variously conceived) has given rise to concern with cultural literacy. Such views tend to see literacy and literacy education as identical and to stress that the central purpose of education is to introduce young people to the major ideas and ideals from past cultures that have defined and shaped today's society. Some have even been ready to identify specific books, concepts, and titles that they claim all students must be taught.

Case

The children in the Charles Yee School in California spend more than half their primary school day engaged in integrated language arts activities, but most of the time is spent reading and discussing literary and informational titles that all the children have read. Instruction is provided in how to read and write, but the major emphasis is on what is read. Thus, at every level the teacher selects half a dozen works for classes to share and supplements such whole class work with the independent reading of titles children select from classroom libraries. These titles include quality informational books in science, history, geography, biography, and mathematics, in addition to well-known literary titles. Further, one-third of class time in content subjects is devoted to reading, writing, and talking about the ideas in these books. All readings are drawn from a comprehensive list of selected books developed by the school faculty with assistance from outside consultants on literature for children, specialists in ethnic literature, and individuals knowledgeable about reading in subject fields.

Basal readers and writing textbooks are used to provide core instruction and individualized help in skill development but normally are used only three days a week, the balance of time being spent on reading. Word processors are introduced at the intermediate level to extend opportunities for writing.

By the time children in this program have graduated from the eighth grade, they have spent more than 2,800 hours of "in school" time on reading, writing, and thinking about good books in a variety of disciplines.

Questions for Discussion

1. To what degree could such a program be developed to extend students' awareness of major ideas and ideals in our society?
2. The program decreases substantially the amount of time students spend in drill and practice of specific skills in isolation, while increasing the application of these literacy skills in real reading and writing. How will this affect skill development?
3. What are effective ways of ensuring that diverse ethnic heritages are considered in prescribing literature and reading for students in schools?
4. What are the most effective and manageable ways of increasing the amount of reading and writing that students do in school?
5. How do we teach common literary works to promote diverse interpretation rather than standardized understanding?

Issue 11

Literacy and Staff Development

Background

The literate stance requires us to learn from the people we meet, the books we read, and the problems we solve. It requires staff development that is planned collaboratively by all staff members and that focuses in part on reading and responding to important books and ideas. Those responsible for staff development must recognize the need to engage teachers and administrators in collaborative literacy learning and in collegial reflection on, and observation of, teaching practice. Further, unless we take a similar stance toward learning from our students, their literacy suffers. One fundamental question is, "Why would anyone want to read and write?" That question is largely answered for students through the demonstrations of their parents and teachers. For teachers it can be answered through the actions of colleagues and administrators. We seldom find out about the literate habits of teachers or administrators or how they have learned from their students and the people around them.

Case

Fred wished that he would read and write more often. Last summer he took part in a National Writing Project session. He enjoyed the writing and found he could write much better than he had ever imagined. He vowed that he would keep a journal and write some

pieces that were on his mind at the end of the summer. A year later the pieces were still in his head. And he had read only a little more than he had written; two books were the most he could recall. He reasoned that teaching was such an onslaught, with papers, curriculum proliferation, and classroom interruptions, that he just never found his stride. He would arrive home, grab a Coke, catch the news, and fall asleep. And day followed day followed day. He thought about the kinds of discussions at faculty meetings and in the teacher's room. There wasn't much life to the meetings or discussions of books they all had been reading or to any pieces of writing they wanted to share. Reading and writing seemed to be almost as irrelevant for the professional as it was for the students.

Questions for Discussion

1. How does the teacher's literacy affect the students in the classroom?
2. How can literacy become more of a natural part of the life of the teacher?
3. How can such efforts as the National Writing Project and summer sessions from other literacy projects help teachers on a continuing and more lasting basis?

The issues raised in these case studies need to be deliberated by teachers everywhere. Greater awareness of the complexity of literacy is mandatory if sound decision making is to occur. Those who wish to inform themselves about further dimensions of literacy will find the readings that follow to be especially useful.

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The International Reading Association is a 90,000 member nonprofit education organization devoted to the improvement of reading instruction and the promotion of the lifetime reading habit.

The National Council of Teachers of English is an association for teachers and other professionals in English and language arts programs, dedicated to improving English instruction at all academic levels.

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